

Society for American Archaeology

Since Herodotus, Has History Been a Valid Concept?

Author(s): T. Cuyler Young, Jr.

Source: *American Antiquity*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan., 1988), pp. 7-12

Published by: Society for American Archaeology

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/281150>

Accessed: 23/03/2009 15:14

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=sam>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Society for American Archaeology is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Antiquity*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

SINCE HERODOTUS, HAS HISTORY BEEN A VALID CONCEPT?

T. Cuyler Young, Jr.

This paper argues: (1) that there is no meaningful philosophical and practical distinction between history and prehistory until sometime in the Lower Paleolithic; and (2) because history as we practice it is a human invention (usually attributed to Herodotus), perhaps prehistory should be reserved as a term to describe how humans dealt with the past prior to the fifth century B.C. Philosophical underpinnings for the argument are taken from Collingwood; practical examples are drawn from personal experiences in the archaeology and history of Greater Mesopotamia.

Let me begin this discourse by honoring the dictates of modern archaeology, if not all of modern scholarship, by putting up front my basic agenda in this paper. I wish to suggest two propositions. First, there is no meaningful philosophical and practical distinction between history and prehistory until perhaps sometime during the Lower Paleolithic. Second, since history is a human invention (traditionally first created by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. when he wrote his *History of the Persian Wars* [Herodotus 1942], and then cast in the modern “scientific” mold by historians of nineteenth-century Europe), prehistory might be reserved as a term to describe the way in which human beings dealt with the past prior to the invention of history—i.e., prior to the fifth century B.C.

Also by way of preliminary confessional, I should let you know that my thinking on these matters has been much influenced by R. G. Collingwood and what he had to say on history in his two books, *The New Leviathan* (Collingwood 1942) and *The Idea of History* (Collingwood 1946). These works were popular when I was in graduate school in the 1950s, but their power and insight only has affected me after 25 years of attempting to practice history as an archaeologist.

Turning now to the body of my argument, I approach the matter first of all from a philosophical point of view, examining such things as the nature of history, and then from a practical position, using some of my own experience in doing research on Iron Age western Iran.

First, then, I will consider the philosophical issues. Essentially, the question is “What is History?” That is a big subject that I hardly can cover here. I can, however, touch briefly on some of the elements in the answer.

Put broadly, history is what the present *thinks* about the past. Note here that I specifically do not say that history is what *happened* in the past; rather, I stress that history is what a living society *does* with the past. Events of the past which are not studied and are not thereby incorporated into a culture’s vision of itself—most particularly its vision of itself in time and a changing world—are not part of history. They happened, yes, but they are not a part of history until a historian, with a specific purpose which is related to his or her own time and culture, picks up those facts and uses them.

Let us explore a little further this question of what is a historical fact (and here I am much in debt to the thinking of E. H. Carr [1961]). For several millennia people traveling north to south, or south to north, between Rome and the Alps have crossed the Rubicon River. I have done so

T. Cuyler Young, Jr., Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queens Park, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C6

American Antiquity, 53(1), 1988, pp. 7–12.
Copyright © 1988 by the Society for American Archaeology

myself; probably many of you also have done so. Each of those crossings of that river is an event in the past—but none of them is a historical fact. But Julius Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon *is* a historical fact—one so embedded in our own culture's consciousness that we even have the common expression in English, "Crossing the Rubicon." Caesar's crossing of that river is a historical fact because, and only because, a historian decided that it was. It was for him a historical fact because it fit into a larger picture which he was building of the past in order to explain, interpret, and understand his present world. As many of you know, the way in which this fact is used historically—this simple business of crossing a small river in north central Italy—is to demonstrate symbolically Caesar's defiance of the Roman senate, and to show that it was that kind of defiance which eventually killed the Roman Republic and created the Roman Empire.

All Caesar did, of course, was wade his horse across a little creek. But because a historian found that fact useful in developing a story about the past that could be, and was, incorporated into the self-consciousness of his own culture, that simple event of the past becomes a historical fact.

What does a historian do in order to make history with these historical events from the past? Collingwood answers this question well. He says that

the historian must re-enact the past in his own mind When a man thinks historically, he has before him certain documents or *relics* of the past. His business is to discover what the past was which has left these relics behind it! . . . This means discovering the thought . . . which [is] expressed [by the relics]. To discover what this thought was, the historian must think it again for himself [Collingwood 1946:282–283].

Note particularly how at first Collingwood distinguishes between a document and a relic, but then quickly comes to refer to all this "stuff" of history as relics. Put simply, the argument goes as follows: Any relic of the past—i.e., anything preserved from the past—whether it be a document, a potsherd, a chipped-stone tool, a settlement pattern or a song people still sing which has never been written down—is potentially the data, the stuff—of history. It is the stuff of history because it represents thought (conscious or unconscious) by people living in the past. By reenacting those thoughts, the living scholar is doing history.

Thus all preserved, thoughtful acts—no matter what the medium of preservation may be—are potentially historical materials. It follows, therefore, that all nonthoughtful acts (regardless of whether they took place in the past, or whether they follow one upon the other in some kind of a sequence of events which defines change through time) are not the stuff of history. Collingwood is very specific about this point, particularly with regard to what we call "natural history." He says,

Thus there is and can be no history of nature, whether as perceived or as thought by the scientist. No doubt nature contains, undergoes, or even consists of, processes; its changes in time are essential to it, they may even (as some think) be all that it has or is; and these changes may be genuinely creative, no mere repetitions of fixed cyclical phases but the development of new orders of natural being. But all this goes no way towards proving that the life of nature is an historical life or that our knowledge of it is historical knowledge. The only condition on which there could be a history of nature is that the events of nature are actions on the part of some thinking being or beings, and that by studying these actions we could discover what were the thoughts which they expressed and think these thoughts for ourselves. This is a condition which probably no one will claim is fulfilled. Consequently the processes of nature are not historical processes and our knowledge of nature, though it may resemble history in certain superficial ways, e.g., by being chronological, is not historical knowledge [Collingwood 1946:302].

One could of course go on in this philosophical vein indefinitely, but this is enough for me to make my point.

I venture to say that no one would argue that the actions in the past by *Homo sapiens sapiens* were any less thoughtful than are our actions today. Early humans may have had a smaller data base to think about, but that they were thoughtful about what they did surely cannot be in question. There might be less universal agreement on this point when we start considering *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*, for we are now approaching that thorny issue of just when it was that humanity became, in the sense of my argument, thoughtful. Many experts are, however, willing to concede a good deal of thoughtfulness to the Neanderthals; hence his recent reclassification as *sapiens*, or

“wise,” like us—or at least half as wise as *sapiens sapiens* (but then we must remember who is doing the classification). Once, however, we get back into the Lower Paleolithic the issue becomes truly problematic, but perhaps somewhere back in that era there is a boundary line between, on the one hand, natural history, which Collingwood has reminded us is not the stuff of history and, on the other hand, sentient, thoughtful humanity which is the proper subject of history. Perhaps the study of prethoughtful hominids is the proper realm of prehistory.

In any case, *Homo sapiens sapiens* are thoughtful creatures. Their culture, is to a large extent, the result of thought, and this is true whether they write those thoughts down or not. Writing is only one of many media of thought, or of recording thought, which we humans use: Why should we today single out the invention of writing as some kind of major development which interrupts our history, and which sharply divides the way in which we today deal with the past?

When early native Americans (who are not native at all, of course—they were simply the first immigrants) took a piece of flint or obsidian and shaped a Folsom point, they engaged in a thought process. They were doing something thoughtful in Collingwood’s sense of the term and, if that particular chipped stone point happens to be preserved and recovered by an archaeologist, then that thought process is preserved in a relic of the past. When Donald Crabtree sat down and recreated a duplicate of that Folsom point he was acting like a historian—he was reenacting a thought process of the past. When he, and other archaeologists, took that reenactment and used it to develop a picture and an understanding of the past which was meaningful, intelligible, and useful for the present, they were historians—not some special breed of people better known as prehistorians. They were, it seems clear to me, doing history.

So much for the philosophical side of things. Let me share with you some of my very practical thoughts on an aspect of my own research which is relevant to this discussion.

I have given, over the past 25 years or more, some thought and attention to the Iron Age of western Iran. The period begins in the middle of the second millennium B.C. in what are clearly, in the old sense of the term, prehistoric times. It ends in the fifth century B.C. with the rise of the Great Achaemenid Empire of Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes—those oriental despots who, as every Western school child knows, would have destroyed our democracy had they not managed to lose the battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Plataea to the “good guys,” the Greeks. By the ninth century we have written documents from Mesopotamia which bear on our period, and by the fifth century we have local Iranian documents and Herodotus’s *History*. The period was one of great turbulence, change, and importance in the Near East. Some students of the period, myself included, have argued that with the rise of the Achaemenid Empire the world of the ancient Near East came to an end, and that in these developments we see the birth and childhood of something that relates much more to the circumstances of the modern Near East than it does to the older civilizations of Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria. In short, it was an exciting moment in the human drama.

When I first approached the systematic study of this phenomenon in my Ph.D. dissertation for the University of Pennsylvania I made a serious, albeit natural, mistake (Young 1963). Steeped in the concept of a distinction between history and prehistory based on the presence or absence of written relics of the past, I felt it necessary to distinguish sharply and to keep isolated the two bodies of data available on the period. I was convinced that one should first deal with the “prehistoric” peoples of western Iran, primarily known through archaeological research, and in doing so develop patterns of cultural interaction and change that were founded exclusively in that data base. Then, and only then, could one turn to the written sources that touched on that period and place. Independently of the “prehistoric” sources, one would discover and describe patterns of human behavior based on the documents. The culminating act of scholarship (the penultimate chapter of the thesis) then would be to overlay the patterns developed from the two separate data bases and discuss how well they fit together to make a complete picture—a reality which simply had to be right (or so I hoped the examiners would believe). In other words, the patterns drawn from the documents would prove the analysis of the prehistoric record.

What a mistake! Fortunately, for my future career, my examiners fell for this methodology almost as much as I did. In retrospect, however, the fallacy is now clear. I believe it is in large part based on two assumptions: (a) that there is something inherently powerful and revealing about documentary

relics of the past when it comes to writing history, and (b) that nonwritten relics of the past are somehow harder to read, to reenact (in Collingwood's term) and therefore not the stuff of real history.

Let us look first at the general nature of the archaeological data on Iron Age Iran. First, there is not enough of it. We have been excavating sites of this period in this area only for the past 50 years and there are very few of us. Besides, like many in our trade, we do not publish much. Second, much of the data we have recovered does not seem to produce much information on the subjects we wish to explore—it seems not to tell us what we want to know. Third, the information is difficult to interpret. We have trouble finding the questions to ask which might be answered. In Collingwood's terms, we have trouble reenacting the thought processes that created these relics of the past and, as a result, we have trouble fitting them into the coherent system of past thought which created them. Fourth, as a result of all of the above, we have trouble seeing the larger patterns of thought, behavior, and change which are embedded in the data. But there *are* patterns. We get intermittent glimpses of them, which we grasp with relief and therefore probably push too far. Yet these patterns remain unsatisfactory and ultimately, for the historian, frustrating (Levine 1987).

Let me give you one example. Sometime between 800 and 700 B.C. a new kind of pottery appears in the archaeological record of western Iran (Brown 1979; Ingraham 1986; Levine 1987). This pottery is wheel made and clearly mass produced. Assemblages contain wares which range from coarse, crudely made storage jars and cooking pots, through medium coarse, better-made tablewares to very fine, elegant pottery often called in the literature, "Palace Ware." The assemblages are, however, in terms of manufacturing techniques, color, and shape, coherent—which is to say, they are the products of a single culture, not the kind of cultural mix which appears on my family's Christmas dinner table where ceramics of the Victorian, Edwardian, and Scandinavian periods of pottery manufacture all come together.

This ceramic tradition, currently called Iron III or Late Western Buff Ware in the literature, develops and changes through time while retaining its essential coherence. The tradition appears first in a spatially restricted area in western Iran, but eventually spreads widely over the plateau and into lowland Mesopotamia. It has connection with Iron Age Palestine and, eventually, with Hellenistic central Asia. Its correct interpretation as a dynamic ceramic phenomenon is vital to our understanding of the fall of Assyria, the rise of the Medes and Babylonia, and the flourishing of the Achaemenid Empire. Yet we still cannot reenact the thoughts and mechanisms that created and sustained this ceramic assemblage.

Let us now turn to a brief examination of the nature of the written sources on this period (Fales 1980; Levine 1987). Surprisingly enough, they are not very different from the other relics of the age. First, there are not enough of them. Most are cuneiform tablets of clay whose survival depends first on their not being destroyed chemically or mechanically either before or after deposition in the ground, and second on the accidents of the archaeological excavations which bring them to light. Few documents are left from any age for the students of the past, but this particularly is so of Iron Age Iran and Mesopotamia. While on the one hand our sources are more than we have been able to rediscover in the museums of the world, to decipher and to publish, on the other hand, once that task is accomplished we still have but a pitiful remnant of the writings from the period. Second, these written documents do not provide us with much information on the subjects we wish to discuss. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites, and Achaemenids were just not interested in what we are interested in—at least to judge from the kinds of issues they chose to address on their cuneiform tablets. What, for example, is the use of a large group of omen texts from the reign of the Assyrian king Essarhaddon which report meticulously the results of examining the entrails of sheep in search of answers to questions like, "If the king sleeps with his wife, will he get a son?" How am I, a historian today, supposed to take such a text, reenact the thought processes behind it, and then incorporate its message into a coherent reconstruction of the past that enriches and relates to life today? I would rather study a collection of potsherds; at least then at a minimum I could make some technological observations on the past which could be significant for today. Third, the texts are hard to interpret. Here, for example, is an archive—an apparently complete collection of texts from one time and place—which tells me in detail about the economic transactions of a particularly prosperous Babylonian family during the early Achaemenid period. (I speak of the

famous Murashu archive from Babylonia recently studied in detail and with much profit by Matthew Stolper of the Oriental Institute, Chicago [Stolper 1985].) Some of these transactions I can understand, for they involve economic activity with which I am familiar or for which I can find an ethnographic analogy. Examples are: letters of credit, loans with interest rates, land rentals, and the like. But there are dozens of other types of transactions which mean nothing to me—which I cannot reenact, and which, therefore, are of no use in writing a history of the period in Collingwood's sense of the term. Finally, while it is possible to see larger patterns and trends of events in these difficult and arcane documents, nevertheless the patterns remain faint, often discontinuous and, even when partially perceived, unfocused and to many, of little apparent value for the writing of history.

In sum, there is not much difference between the archaeological and the documentary sources. The fundamental nature of the two sets of data is the same: They pose similar problems of interpretation, and neither, as a result, has any greater validity in our efforts to reenact the past than the other. Yet somehow, in the old model that would make a distinction between historic and prehistoric periods and sources, the written documents are supposed to have more power and to make it easier for me to find out what was going on in Iron Age Iran. Rubbish.

While other written sources—closer to us in time and culture—might be said to be different than those textual sources on Iron Age Iran, in fact they are not. In reading the diaries and memoirs of those who fought at the battle of Waterloo in 1815 I run into the same kinds of obscurities, difficulties of interpretation, lacunae in the record, and irrelevant observations as I do with the Mesopotamian cuneiform sources of the first millennium B.C. There are differences in scale between these two sets of data, but I find them the same philosophically and practically.

To return to Iron Age Mesopotamia and Iran. Neither of my data bases (the archaeological or the documentary) is any more *sensible* in the full meaning of the term than the other. I find that when I apply an equal degree of thought and skepticism to each—when I spend as much time trying to reenact the thoughts embedded in the one as in the other—that neither alone provides the answers. What allows me to attempt a history of this time and place is a judicious selection from both data bases of what it is that I consider to be historical facts. Often this leads to the rejection of a so-called fact derived from the written sources in the light of information provided by a group of potsherds. It also often leads me to the conclusion that what a particular omen text has to say about Essarhadon's married life has no more historical relevance than the fact that Pompey crossed the Rubicon a dozen times before Caesar ever got there. In terms of how I wish to try to make the history of Iron Age Iran relevant and useful to my own time and place, the fact that gray pottery entirely is replaced by buff-colored pottery in the eighth or late-ninth centuries may be much more of a useful historical fact than anything derived from the written documents.

In sum, therefore, on practical and epistemological grounds I would argue that the old distinction between prehistory and history, based on the presence or absence of written relics of the past, is artificial and of little use. As students of the past for several millennia back in time, we are dealing with the thought processes of fellow human beings, regardless of our sources. By dealing with thoughts in the past, and by reenacting those thoughts for our own purposes today, we are doing exactly what Herodotus tried to do and what Western historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century A.D. have developed into a rigorous academic discipline. In short, I am now convinced that even when I write about the Neolithic of the Near East, I am writing history.

Finally, I would end with something of a tangential observation. Ethnologists and social anthropologists have thought and written much in the past half century about how so-called "primitive" cultures really are not primitive at all in any true sense of the term. They have suggested that this concept of *primitive* as opposed to *advanced* in human culture was, and is, somehow a Eurocentric, mainly Victorian, idea which provided a typological mechanism whereby an expanding, industrializing, progressive Europe could measure itself against the rest of humanity. I cannot help wondering in the light of such observations whether perhaps the archaeologist's tendency to cling to a distinction between ancient cultures that could write and those that could not—that is, those that were prehistoric—is not in part a subconscious reflection of the same kind of nineteenth-century cultural vision: one that divides peoples into primitive and advanced. But that is the subject of quite another paper.

REFERENCES CITED

- Brown, S. C.
 1979 *Kinship to Kingship: Archaeological and Historical Studies in the Neo-Assyrian Zagros*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Near Eastern Studies, University of Toronto.
- Carr, E. H.
 1961 *What is History?* Penguin, Harmondsworth.
- Collingwood, R. G.
 1942 *The New Leviathan*. Clarendon, Oxford.
 1946 *The Idea of History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Fales, F. M. (editor)
 1980 *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analyses*. *Oriens Antiqui* Collectio XVII, Rome. Centro per le Antichità e la Storia Dell'arte del Vicino Oriente.
- Herodotus
 1942 *The Persian Wars*. Translated by G. Rawlinson. Modern Library, New York.
- Ingraham, M. I.
 1986 *Issues of General Theory and Archaeological Practice in the Study of the Perceptible Rise of the Achaemenid-Persian Empire: Logicist Analysis at Godin Tepe (Period II, 800?-500+ B.C.)*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto.
- Levine, L. D.
 1987 The Iron Age. In *The Archaeology of Western Iran*, edited by F. Hole, pp. 229-250. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
- Stolper, M.
 1985 *Entrepreneurs and Empire: The Murašu Archive, the Murašu Firm, and Persian Rule in Babylonia*. Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te Istanbul.
- Young, T. C., Jr.
 1963 *Proto-historic Western Iran: An Archaeological and Historical Review*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania. University Microfilms, Ann Arbor.